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11 August 2017

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Green, Adrian and Schadla-Hall, R.T. (2000) 'The building of Quenby Hall, Leicestershire - a reassessment.', Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society., 74 . pp. 21-36.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/publications/vol71s0.html>

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The Building of Quenby Hall, Leicestershire – A Reassessment

by Adrian Green and R. T. Schadla-Hall

Quenby Hall, in Hungarton parish, eight miles north-east of Leicester, is a Jacobean H-plan house standing in parkland on a prominent hill-top site. The presence in east Leicestershire of an early seventeenth-century manor house of elaborate sophistication, but built by a relatively obscure family, raises a series of questions about the siting, architectural style, building process and social context of elite houses in early modern England. This paper presents new architectural evidence for the building of Quenby and clarifies the history of the house. It demonstrates that the house is the result of a single and attenuated building sequence, and that despite suggestions of an earlier house on the site there is no evidence for this. The paucity of documentary evidence and vague dating of Quenby has muted the architectural and historical significance of the house. By reassessing the building and social history of Quenby here, we hope that the significance of the house will now be recognised.

Introduction

Quenby Hall (illus. 1 & 2) is ‘the most important early seventeenth-century house in the county’¹ and one of the most important in the Midlands. In *TLAS* 1931, Farnham traced the history of the manor of Quenby from the Conquest to the mid-fourteenth century, and dealt briefly with the building of Quenby Hall by George Ashby (1598-1653).² Farnham refers to the history of Quenby in Nichols, and draws on Tipping’s account of the house in *Country Life*.³ Pevsner and Williamson’s subsequent account, provides details of the general building chronology and alterations since the early seventeenth century.⁴ The present paper explores further the social history of Quenby Hall, and clarifies the building history and use of the house.

Quenby was held by the Ashby family from the thirteenth century.⁵ In 1304 ‘a messuage was held by Richard de Ashby’.⁶ The earthwork remains of the medieval village lie within the present park; the village population is recorded in the Leicestershire

¹ N. Pevsner & E. Williamson, *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire & Rutland*, London: Penguin, 1984, pp.351-3, here p.351.

² G. Farnham, ‘Quenby: The Manor and Hall’, *TLAS*, XVI 1930-31, pp.17-43.

³ J. Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, III. i 1800, 1971, pp.294-301; Tipping, H. A. *Country Life*, 14 & 21 October, 1911.

⁴ N. Pevsner, *Leicestershire & Rutland*, London: Penguin, 1960; Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1.

⁵ Richard de Ashby (d.1304) acquired Quenby in 1299; Farnham 1930-31, as n.2, for earlier records.

⁶ C. Latham, *English Homes*, II 1907 pp.245-50, here p.250.

Survey of 1124-29 and the Poll Tax of 1377 (25 people paid).⁷ The earthworks may well have been degraded after depopulation, and there is no clear indication of a substantial building in or associated with the surviving earthwork remains which would imply or indicate a manor house site.⁸ The settlement of Quenby, along with Lowesby, was depopulated and enclosed in 1485-89.⁹ The Ashbys' landholdings link Lowesby (a mile to the north) with Quenby from the late fifteenth century through to the seventeenth century. In the early-mid sixteenth century Robert Ashby of Quenby (1516-1577) married Barbara (d. 1598) daughter of George Ashby of Lowesby.¹⁰ This marriage signifies two branches of the Ashby family holding inter-dependent estates at Quenby and Lowesby. The son of the Quenby/Lowesby match, George Ashby, High Sheriff of the County in 1601, became possessed of Lowesby on the death of Thomas Ashby in 1604 and in 1607 was also 'of Quenby'.¹¹ There were Ashbys resident at both Quenby and Lowesby in the sixteenth century; the 1563 Diocesan return records Ashbys at the manor house at Lowesby and at the great house at Quenby.¹² Quenby became the principal Ashby estate in the early seventeenth century. George's son, George Ashby, inherited Quenby and Lowesby on his father's death in 1618, after which date the H-plan house was begun. George Ashby sold Lowesby in 1636 on the completion of his new house at Quenby.¹³

George Ashby's new house begs the question of an earlier house at Quenby. There was surely some rebuilding between the late fifteenth-century depopulation and enclosure of Quenby and the early seventeenth-century house. The reference to a great house in the Diocesan records of 1563 would certainly imply this was the case. At Lowesby, no sixteenth-century fabric is known to survive.¹⁴ Baggrave Hall and Ingarsby Hall (a mile either side of Quenby) were both rebuilt in the sixteenth century. Baggrave and Ingarsby parallel the dual-landholding, depopulation and enclosure of Quenby and Lowesby. Baggrave manor (enclosed c.1500) was acquired from Leicester Abbey by Francis Cave (d.1584) who built a house on the present site of Baggrave Hall.¹⁵ Ingarsby (enclosed 1469) was bought by Brian Cave in 1540, and the house there was extended by him.¹⁶ The density of manors in this part of Leicestershire was determined

⁷ Farnham 1930-1, as n.2, & W.G. Hoskins, *Provincial England: Essays in Social and Economic History*, London: Macmillan, 1963, pp.115-130 (includes maps of deserted villages at Lowesby & Quenby).⁸

Hoskins 1963, as n.7, & F. Hartley, unpublished groundplan of Quenby earthworks, both record the possible small moated site on the southern edge of the earthworks, which Hoskins thought too small to contain a manor house. This is certainly the case, and there is a strong likelihood that the moated feature is associated with a (? late) seventeenth-century garden (per. comm. Brian Dix).

⁹ L.A. Parker, 'The Tudor Enclosure Movement in Leicestershire, 1485-1607', unpublished thesis, 1948, p.33 cited in Hoskins 1963, as n.7, pp.127 and 130.

¹⁰ 'List of owners' in possession of Squire de Lisle; Nichols 1800, as n.3, Robert Ashby d.1577 cousin of predecessor at Quenby.

¹¹ Nichols 1800, as n.3, pp.294 & 299, claims George Ashby acquired Lowesby 'most probably by purchase'.

¹² Hoskins 1963, as n.7, pp.127-130.

¹³ Nichols 1800, as n.3.

¹⁴ Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, p.296, core of Lowesby Hall is seventeenth century of Ketton stone, the present house dates to 1707.

¹⁵ Hoskins 1963, as n.7, Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, p.88, Baggrave passed to Edwyns by 1680, rebuilt 1750s.

¹⁶ Hoskins 1963 as n.7; Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, pp.185-6, Ingarsby sold to Sir Robert Bannister (d.1649).

in the medieval period; a pattern which subsequently structured the location of rebuilt manor houses in the post-medieval period. (Illus. 3 shows the location of rebuilt or extended manor houses in the Quenby area).

The Building of Quenby Hall

Previous accounts of Quenby's history, originating in Nichols' summary, have not dwelt on the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century occupation of Quenby. There was a manor house at Quenby in the sixteenth century, with a medieval predecessor, and the hill-top site (illus. 4) chosen in the early seventeenth century may not have been a new departure.¹⁷ Several authors have suggested that an earlier manor house over-looked the original village, as there is no manor house site evident in the village earthworks.¹⁸ Furthermore, it has been suggested that the southern basement of the present building may contain remains of an earlier house.¹⁹ However, there is no trace of re-used stone work in the building above or below ground. More likely, the ironstone stables immediately to the north are a rebuilding of the earlier house. Our survey of the basement (illus. 5) has established that the present house is not a rebuilding of an earlier house on exactly the same site.

The history of the house after its construction is well known, but the process of construction in the early seventeenth century has been less clear. The building of Quenby Hall was unusually protracted. The dating and costing of Quenby's construction imply a complicated and convoluted building process. The house was begun after George Ashby inherited in 1618, aged 29.²⁰ The clock, on the porch turret on the west front, is dated 1620 and two rainwater heads 1621. Summerson took this to mean the house was 'finished 1621', but dates on buildings do not always correlate with construction.²¹ 1620-21 could refer to the start of building. The porch is inscribed '6 Charles I': that is 1630-31. Nichols, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, asserts that 'the present mansion-house at Quenby (which cost £12,000) was built in 1636; and the lordship of Lowesby was sold to Mr. Paramore',²² thereby establishing 1636 as the date by which the house was finished.²³ The sale of Lowesby, after the completion of the house at Quenby, demonstrates that the Ashbys were making Quenby the centre of their estate in the early seventeenth century, in contrast to the dual land-holding between Quenby and Lowesby of earlier generations. This was a significant action for the family to have taken during a period in which gentry lands conferred legitimacy to social status through an assertion of the longevity of lineage and landholdings.²⁴ It was in this context, that George Ashby, builder of Quenby Hall, had

¹⁷ Hoskins 1963, as n.7, p.130.

¹⁸ D. Durant, 'Quenby Hall' n.d. in possession of Squire de Lisle, suggested a timber-frame hall replaced by local sandstone (sic) hall preceded the present house, on this site.

¹⁹ Durant n.d. as n.18, & Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, p.353.

²⁰ Nichols 1800, as n.3, p.299; Pevsner 1960, as n.4, dated Quenby 1615-20; Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, gives post 1618.

²¹ J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, London: Penguin, 1969, p.92.

²² Nichols 1800, as n.3, p.294.

²³ A. McWhirr, 'Brickmaking in Leicestershire before 1710', *TLAHS* 71 1997, pp.37-59, at p.47 dates Quenby 1618-36.

²⁴ F. Heal & G. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500-1700*, London: Macmillan, 1994, p.51 & passim.



1. Quenby Hall: The West Front. (Tim Schadla-Hall photo)

been named George after his father (of Quenby) and maternal grandfather (of Lowesby). George Ashby supposedly wrote in 1629 that, 'It is 300 years since the first rise of the Ashbies'.²⁵ Whatever the relative status of the Quenby and Lowesby estates before the seventeenth century, the Ashbys certainly preferred Quenby (perhaps because of its dominating site, in contrast to low-lying Lowesby) for their seventeenth-century 'prodigy' house (illus. 3).²⁶

The confusion over the building period of Quenby has produced dates ranging from as early as 1615 or 1620 through to 1636. Quenby has been dated on stylistic grounds to 1615-1620, but almost certainly post-dates George Ashby's inheritance in 1618. Unfortunately we have not been able to locate further papers relating to the building of the house. The numerous references to the building of Quenby all omit to explore the motivation and interests involved in its construction and use, prior to the extensive alterations made by Shuckburgh Ashby in the later eighteenth century. What historical evidence exists warrants a reassessment of the social context for the building of Quenby Hall.

Nichols' £12,000 cost for Quenby, and a building period which from the various sources seems likely to have stretched over sixteen years (c.1620-1636) – which is clearly a longer period than normal for a house of this size – imply complications of family, finance, or building plans and their execution. If money was the problem, then the

²⁵ Latham 1907, as n.6, p.250, the same "Ashby hand" continued 'My father hath writeings ever since King John's dayes'; both Latham and Ashby evidently had access to documents now unknown.

²⁶ Summerson 1969, as n.21, pp.61-95, discusses Elizabethan and Jacobean elite architecture under the term 'prodigy house'.

Ashbys pursued the classic gentry strategy of marrying merchant money. George Ashby married Elizabeth Bennett, daughter of George Bennett, Esq. of London in about 1625.²⁷ Bennett was a Citizen, Freeman, and Salter of London, with sufficient wealth to fine for the office of Alderman (i.e. he paid not to take up the time-consuming duties of alderman) for Tower Ward in 1621.²⁸ In 1615 he had been elected Sheriff of London.²⁹ The Bennetts were seeking to establish themselves as Leicestershire gentry, and used marriage as a means to do so. George Bennett held lands at Welby and around Melton Mowbray by the 1620s. In 1626 George Bennett's son, also called George, married Susannah, daughter of Edward Cotton, citizen and merchant tailor of London. Their marriage settlement conveyed the manor of Welby and other property in Melton Mowbray, Asfordby, and Sysonby to the use of George Bennett the elder and on his death to George Bennett the younger and, on his death, part to Susannah as her jointure.³⁰ Susannah evidently brought enough money to the marriage to warrant her part of the Leicestershire estate should she be widowed after her father-in-law's death. We do not know how much money Elizabeth Bennett brought to the Ashbys and Quenby. Her brother, George Bennett the younger, predeceased his father in 1630, and his will confirms George Bennett the elder as a wealthy man. George left his entire estate to his 'loving wife' Susannah, for 'I am assured that my sonne George will bee sufficiently provided for in lands by and after the decease of my Father'.³¹ George Bennett the elder had retained his Leicestershire estate, and must have valued the Ashby match as a signal of gentility in Leicestershire and beyond. The strong likelihood is that Elizabeth Bennett's marriage portion and metropolitan links had an impact on the building of Quenby Hall, a likelihood reinforced by Nichols' comment that 'the picture of a lady still remains [at the Hall] who is supposed to have had a main hand in the building or compleating of this house, but her features are now scarcely traceable'.³²

Our entire knowledge of the Ashby family is limited to Leicestershire and adjacent counties.³³ Yet Quenby Hall represents a house of grander aspirations than straightforward county gentry. Mercer has suggested an architectural cleavage among the early seventeenth-century gentry to mirror the political divide which presaged the civil war. Mercer proposed that the court gentry built very different houses to the country interest; arguing that the 'square or rectangular block' was typical of the country interest, whereas the court gentry built a 'multiplicity of types'. Mercer describes George Ashby as 'solidly gentry', 'descendant of a long line of Leicestershire squires' who built 'in imitation of the "courtiers"' and at Quenby Hall the 'attempt at a "courtier" effect can be seen'.³⁴ Social emulation is too easily used to explain architectural anomalies. Indeed, Ashby's supposed aspirations undercut Mercer's own faith in the political associations of architectural style. Quenby Hall's main link to London, was via the city not the court, and George Ashby's marriage to Elizabeth Bennett served a Leicestershire

²⁷ Nichols 1800, as n.3, p.299, dates marriage March 1625?.

²⁸ Corporation of London Records Office staff point out this was unusual and implies considerable wealth.

²⁹ Corporation of London Records Office, *The Aldermen of the City of London* II, p.55.

³⁰ LRO Welby 44'28/700 (Marriage Settlement 21 Nov. 1626 Rothley Temp.).

³¹ PRO Prerogative Court of Canterbury 106 Scroope, George Bennett will Nov. 26 1630.

³² Nichols 1800, as n.3, p.296.

³³ See Farnham 1930-31, as n.2, & LRO 35'29/340 17C; 14D42/13 1621/2; DE/1025 1665; DE.803 1720, for Ashbys & lands in Quenby, Ingarsby, Baggrave, Hungarton & elsewhere in Leics., Northants. etc.; Nichols 1800, as n.3, p.299, George Ashby (1629-1672) m.1652 Mary, heiress of Euseby Shukeburgh of Naseby, Northants.

³⁴ E. Mercer, 'The Houses of the Gentry', *Past and Present*, 5 1954, pp.11-33, quoting pp.21-22.

context. Architectural historians have all too readily identified building projects with the male head of the family, but increasingly wives and widows are being recognised as architecturally active. Nichols reports the family tradition that Mrs Elizabeth Ashby 'had a main hand' in building Quenby, and Elizabeth was certainly interested in her husband's family history, writing in 1670 that 'According to the heraldic authorities, the ancient name of Ashby was 'Ashbowe''.³⁵

George Ashby was not active at court and, although he built a 'prodigy' house, was not a political player conspicuously spending the profits of office on building. Yet Quenby Hall has all the hall-marks defined by Summerson's Jacobean 'prodigy house', which he limits to James' reign and the following decade. Summerson points out that these houses were connected to but were not a creation of court culture, and are national rather than metropolitan in style.³⁶ Indeed, the Elizabethan and Jacobean architecture of which Quenby is a part, represents an 'English Renaissance' architecture. Girouard has elaborated this style for houses known to be by Robert Smythson, and demonstrates that their geography was concentrated in the North and Midlands.³⁷ Quenby Hall has the marks of a Smythson house as discerned by Girouard: high and compact, resting on high basements containing kitchens, cellars and offices; great chambers and long galleries on the first and second floors, and plans of 'striking and ingenious outline'. Moreover, 'deep recession, soaring height, evocative silhouette', Girouard suggests 'call out for a hill-top site'.³⁸ More conclusively, Quenby has masons' marks which are paralleled on Smythson houses at Hardwick Hall and Chastleton. Quenby certainly needed competent craftsmen, but since the same mason mark shows up at Burghley, built at least fifty years before and not a Smythson house, the Smythson connection may be over-played.³⁹

Quenby's architecture echoes Doddington Hall (c.1593-1600) in Lincolnshire, another 'Smythson-style' house. Both the plan and facade of Quenby have parallels at Doddington. Girouard tells us that there is 'no documentary evidence to connect Smythson with Doddington' but claims that 'the stylistic connections are strong enough to make it probable that he supplied the designs'.⁴⁰ The parallels between Quenby and Doddington only tell us that this architectural style was current in the region. Plans or 'plats' circulated in manuscript, and though no social connection is known between Doddington and Quenby, there is no need for an architect as author. Quenby is not considered to be innovative architecturally, and in fact comes at the end of this style of house. The motivations for building in this manner are undocumented, but it may be that an existing hill-top site at Quenby favoured the adoption of this high and dramatic style of house. George Ashby's marriage into London merchant money is the only significant break in the family's county gentry tradition. The Bennetts may have had ambitions for the Ashbys, which the dominating house expresses. This is a real social context, which answers the otherwise nebulous suggestion of emulation; the Ashbys were not building a 'Smythson' house (and Robert Smythson died in 1614 before Quenby was begun), but were erecting a sophisticated architecture which dominates the surrounding landscape (illus. 4).

³⁵ Latham, 1907, as n.6, p.250.

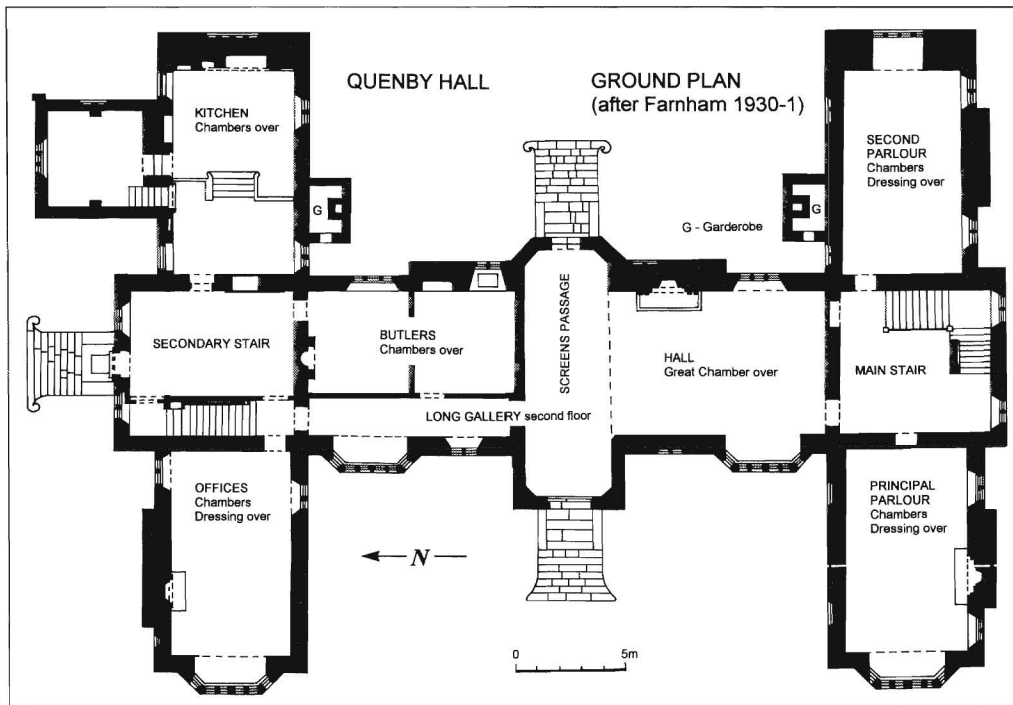
³⁶ Summerson 1969, as n.21, pp.61-95.

³⁷ M. Girouard, *Robert Smythson & the Elizabethan Country House*, London: Yale, 1983.

³⁸ Girouard 1983, as n.37, pp.187-8.

³⁹ Durant n.d., as n.18, but masons' marks were too generalised in this period to warrant close identification of craftsmen with buildings in this way.

⁴⁰ Girouard 1983, as n.37, pp.138-9.



2. Quenby Hall: Ground Floor Plan (after Farnham TLAS 1930-1). (Jane Russell)

Nichols described the house as ‘flat roofed’⁴¹ and leaded, a most substantial building on an extensive plan; with door and window jambs of stone’. From the leads, the narrowness of the house is readily apparent, contrasting with the massive appearance from the ground. The view, partially eclipsed by later tree planting, takes in a wide sweep of Leicestershire, with Lowesby clearly visible to the north. The significance of viewing the landscape and landownership from the leads and upper floors of great houses, has been well established for this period.⁴² Quenby’s H-plan and three storeys, with great chamber and long gallery on the first and second floors, facilitated extensive views from within the generously windowed house. Such issues of inter-visibility contextualise the house. Nichols observed that, ‘had the house been a parallelogram much of the outer walling could have been saved’.⁴³ Farnham develops Nichols’ observation in his comment on Quenby’s, ‘maximum use of external walls’.⁴⁴ But both Nichols and Farnham fail to explain this choice of architecture. Mercer pointed out that houses are built in certain ways for a reason. More precisely, Mercer argued that Quenby was not a ‘rectangular’ style house because the Ashbys did not identify themselves in the early seventeenth century as typical of the country interest gentry.⁴⁵

⁴¹ In fact, a very shallow pitched roof.

⁴² Girouard 1983, as n.37; R. Williams, *The Country & the City*, London: Hogarth Press, 1973.

⁴³ Nichols 1800, as n.3.

⁴⁴ Farnham 1930-1, as n.2.

⁴⁵ Mercer 1954, as n.34.

The need to explain the social motivations for building Quenby Hall is made acute when we compare the builders of Quenby and Doddington. Doddington Hall was built by Thomas Tailor, a self-made man who owned 9,000 acres.⁴⁶ George Ashby only made money by marriage, and showed no interest even in engaging with the Leicestershire county community. Ashby was among the six JPs picked by Charles I in the late 1620s for Leicestershire; Cogswell describes George Ashby as ‘too well off to care’ to object to the personal cost of taking up the post. There may be an element of circularity here, as Cogswell may have surmised Ashby’s wealth from his expensive house. Cogswell does demonstrate that Ashby was not involved in the main machinations of Leicestershire gentry, such as the Haselrigg and Huntingdon circle in the run up to the Civil War.⁴⁷ Quenby Hall was not built to entertain the court, and it seems unlikely that it was even a primary venue for the county gentry.

The Architecture of Quenby Hall

Quenby is built of brick with limestone dressings (quoins, windows, and door surrounds) above an ironstone basement. The oolitic limestone probably came from between Weldon and Ketton. The brick source for such an extensive build was probably obtained locally.⁴⁸ The geology of the site is on the lower Lias. The basement (four feet visible above ground) is built of iron stone (or ‘marl’ stone) which would be obtained from the middle Lias. The nearest known source is Tilton on the Hill (two miles north east) although other sources may have been available. There is a wide variation in marl stone type, hardness and appearance, usually ignored by architectural historians. At Quenby, the interior stone door surrounds are made of a presumably preselected fine grained ironstone; the window mullions (of the basement) are a harder ironstone, and the rest of the work is invariably a softer ironstone.⁴⁹

The ironstone basement finishes in a dressed plinth around the house, with the brick main floors stepped in above it. Limestone string-courses mark the floor divisions. The first and second storeys are stepped in above each string-course; adding to the effect of soaring height, viewed up close. Viewed from afar, the massive appearance of the H-plan house is bulkily effective for miles around. A brick parapet surrounds the shallow-pitched lead roof. Detailed facade drawings and plans of the main floors are printed in *TLAS* 1931.⁵⁰

The internal plan of Quenby (illus. 2) parallels Doddington Hall.⁵¹ Quenby’s central entrance opens on to a screens passage, within the hall. There is a clear service / high-end split to the cross-wings of the H. The ground floor rooms to the north of the cross-passage are entirely given over to offices. The cross-wing (south) off the high-end of the

⁴⁶ Girouard 1983, as n.37, pp.138-9.

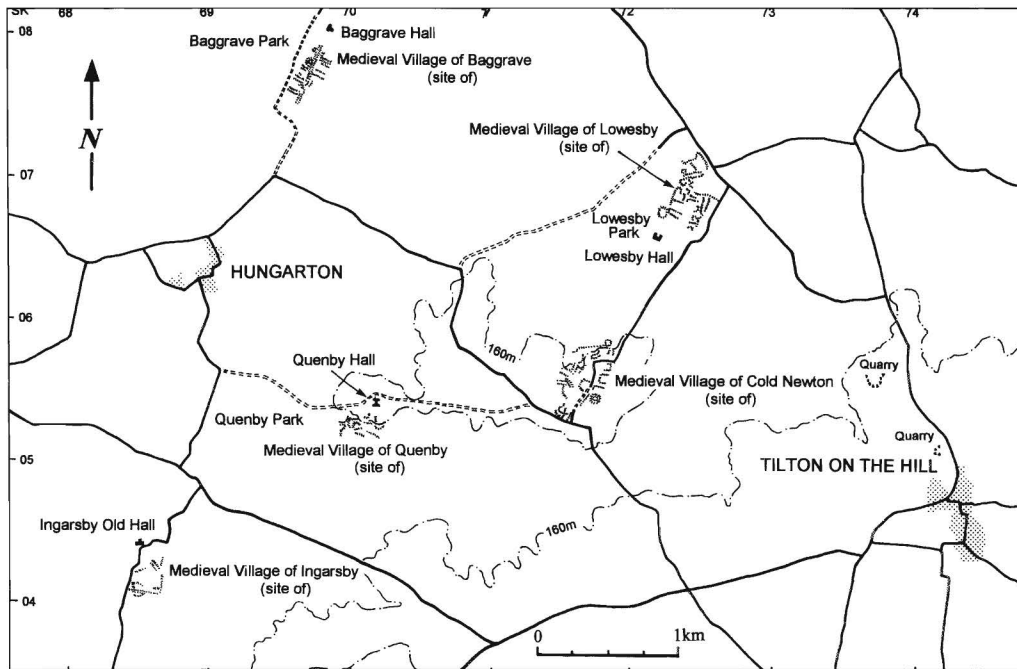
⁴⁷ T. Cogswell, *Home Divisions: Aristocracy, the state and provincial conflict*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, pp.232-4.

⁴⁸ McWhirr 1997, as n.23, p.47.

⁴⁹ see J.D. Hudson & D.S. Sutherland, ‘The Geological Description and Identification of Building Stones’ in D. Parsons, ed. *Stone: quarrying and building in England AD 43-1525*, London: Philimore, 1990, pp.16-32.

⁵⁰ Farnham 1930-31, as n.2, Farnham’s original measured drawings in LRO 3D42/M13/2 & MISC 12/14; see also Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, & illustrations in Latham 1907, as n.6, & Tipping 1911, as n.3.

⁵¹ Girouard 1983, as n.37, p.137 for Doddington’s plan.



3. Quenby Hall, its environs and other locations mentioned in the text. (Jane Russell)

hall accommodates the main stair with parlours to either side. At Doddington, the services fill one cross-wing with only cellars in the basement and ‘butlers’ between the cross-wing and hall; the main stair and twin parlours exactly parallel Quenby. On Quenby’s first and second floors, the cross-wings accommodate eight chambers with dressing rooms; to either side of both staircases on both floors there is a large dressing room (where a personal servant may have slept) off a short corridor leading to the bed-chamber, with garderobe closets on the east side. As at Doddington, there was a great chamber over the hall, accessed from the main stair, and a long gallery filled the entire central range on the second floor with access via the clocktower stair to the leads.

Quenby’s plan has not always been so easily understood. Shuckburgh Ashby created a two-storey hall by removing the great chamber floor in the later eighteenth century, and the long gallery was sub-divided. Gotch and Bodley were later employed to restore the Jacobean character of the house; the quality and borrowings of their work can confuse. It is necessary to discount misplaced interpretations of Quenby’s original room use. The suggestion that the ground floor was entirely given over to servants is clearly wrong, and based on Hardwick Hall.⁵² A first-floor long gallery has also been erroneously suggested; Gotch correctly restored a great chamber above the originally single-storey hall.⁵³

The use of the house is clear when the structure of the plan is understood (illus. 2). The high and low ends of the house pivot on the central entrances and cross-passage. This status symmetry is graded by ‘butlers’ before offices and kitchen at the service end.

⁵² Durant n.d., as n.18, pp. 4-5.

⁵³ Latham 1907, as n.6, p.248.



4. Quenby Hall: the house in its landscape from the west. (Tim Schadla-Hall photo)

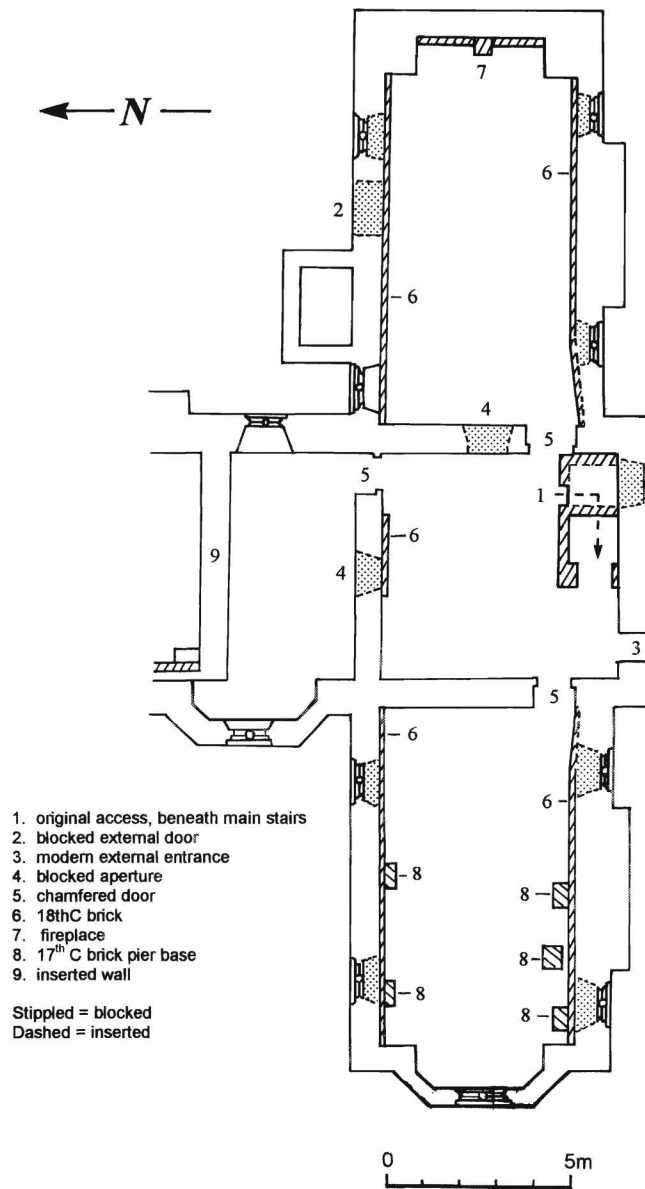
To the high end, the dias end of the hall gives onto the principal stair with parlours off. The east/west symmetry is also graded in use, with the better parlour and offices facing west (in the cross-wings), whereas the second parlour and kitchen face east. The garderobe towers are also on the east side; not visible on the main (west) front. On the upper floors, the house follows the same high/low end arrangement. The superior bed chambers were on the south side, and the great chamber and long gallery had privileged access from the main (south) stair (with secondary access from the service side of the house). The second stair in the north cross-wing rises from a servants' hall, and functioned primarily as a service stair. Doubtless the family also used the north stair and probably had their bed chambers on the north side, with the south side (high end) reserved for hospitality. The long gallery connected both sides of the house. Outside, the stable courtyard was to the north, accessed from the servants' hall, whereas gardens and the park surround the east, south, and west fronts of the house.

The cost of the house was considerable, as was the time it took to build. The reported figure of £12,000 was astronomical; £8,000 spent on building Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire (where Smythson was involved in the 1580s) was sufficient to debilitate Sir Francis Willoughby's estate.⁵⁴ Most families spent far less, and those that did spend extravagantly were usually prominent for other reasons.⁵⁵ The great cost of

⁵⁴ Heal & Holmes 1994, as n.24, pp.137-8; Girouard 1983, as n.37, p.309 & passim. for published & MS building accounts.

⁵⁵ L. Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp.549-55.

QUENBY HALL SOUTHERN BASEMENT



5. Quenby Hall: the Southern Basement. (Adrian Green & Jane Russell)



6. Quenby Hall: The North exterior of the southern basement showing the doorway in the earlier basement, and discontinuity in building above the plinth. (Tim Schadla-Hall photo)

Quenby may have involved alterations in construction. Possibly, as the house went up the cost of materials proved too much. As Nichols noted, ‘The tradition in the family is that, from the great quantities of material underground as much money was spent as it was thought would have finished the whole’.⁵⁶

Architectural evidence in the Basement

The southern basement (illus. 5) has been taken to provide possible evidence for an earlier house on which the seventeenth-century house was constructed. It has frequently been suggested that the fireplace in the south basement (or cellar) provides evidence for an earlier house (implied in Farnham and stated in Pevsner). This paper finally resolves the dating of the basement, and makes sense of the family tradition reported by Nichols that money was wasted below ground.

The southern part of the basement, beneath the south cross-wing and one bay of the upper end of the hall, relates solely to the seventeenth-century building. The physical evidence consists of ashlar walling, with chamfered doorway jambs and blocked apertures, and an inserted wall dividing the now disused southern basement from the currently occupied northern basement. A fireplace and blocked external door remain in the south-east room. The southern basement probably fell out of use in the early eighteenth century, when the Ashbys could no longer support an extensive household.

⁵⁶ Nichols 1800, as n.3.

The house was sold to Shuckburgh Ashby in 1759, who found ‘the offices in ruins’.⁵⁷ There is no made floor, presumably a flagged floor has been removed, and internal access from beneath the main stair has been blocked, as has the external door. The blocking of the internal access from beneath the stair and creation of the modern external entrance (cutting through an original mullion window) was probably executed in the early twentieth century. The floor was possibly removed before this, since the labour and value of reusing flags would be worthwhile in the eighteenth century but not in the twentieth. The plinth to the ironstone base of the house is integral to the original external doorway with its four-centred-arch ironstone lintel, and chamfered jambs. A course of ironstone exists above the plinth over the doorway, whereas the rest of the house is entirely of brick above the plinth (illus. 6). This door was blocked with ironstone externally, no later than Shuckburgh’s mid-late eighteenth-century brick vaulting. The anomaly of the blocked door and ironstone above the plinth, stands out from the whole rhythm of the house, and demonstrates the discontinuity between the basement building (of which the external doorway is a part) and the completion of the brick house above.

The southern basement was in use from the building of Quenby Hall in the 1620s until some time before the later eighteenth-century alterations (illus. 5). The wide fireplace has ashlar block jambs and an eighteenth-century brick arch (supporting vaulting) replacing a slightly higher stone arch.⁵⁸ The ashlar is of the same provenance as the rest of the ironstone in the basement. The early seventeenth-century brick hearth and fire-back are heavily sooted; the brick hearth has been partially removed and the fire-back partly rebuilt. A flue still connects this fireplace to the chimney stack on the roof. A parallel chimney arrangement serves the main cooking hearth in the kitchen in the north east wing.

The ironstone ashlar walling shows no sign of weathering and again is of similar stone to the rest of the basement (lacking the characteristic brown appearance of the exterior as it was never exposed to sun-light). The integral broad chamfered and stopped doorways match others in the main floors of the house (though some of these are later replacements by Gotch).⁵⁹ The doorways in the south basement are cut off, with their lintels lost, to accommodate the inserted eighteenth-century brick vaulting. Prior to this, timber joists must have carried boarded floors to the ground-floor rooms, and brick pier bases in the south west room indicate extra support for the floor and large stone chimney-piece in the parlour above. The three doors face into the central space beneath the main stair hall, indicating that access from beneath the main stair was prioritised. The two blocked apertures in the ashlar (tooled ironstone) walls also open into this central space. These cannot have been windows, unless this space was intended to be external. The apertures were blocked with the same tooled ironstone as the walls, probably during the early seventeenth-century construction period. The inserted stone wall beneath the hall, separating the southern from the northern basements, was again most probably constructed during the early seventeenth-century building work, and can be no later than the eighteenth-century brick vaulting. The internal walls of the basement, the blocking of the apertures, and inserted wall dividing the basements, are

⁵⁷ Durant n.d., as n.18, p.7.

⁵⁸ Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, p.353.

⁵⁹ Pevsner & Williamson 1984, as n.1, p.352.

all of the same tooled ironstone, with no differentiation in stone type or weathering. The blocked apertures and inserted wall can only be explained by an alteration in building plans during construction.

The division of Quenby's plan into high and low ends has been explained for the upper floors. The high value of the contents or use of the southern basement is implied by access from beneath the main stair at the best end of the house. The southern basement had no internal communication with the service end of the house. The south west room of the basement and space beneath the hall may have been used for storing high value goods. The fireplace in the south east room was presumably not used for cooking; the kitchen was at the other end of the house. It was perhaps associated with brewing, though there is no evidence of brewing equipment now. The southern basement was probably not occupied by servants, since this was not the service end of the house. The fact that these cellars fell out of use during the eighteenth-century suggests that their function had become redundant. This southern basement thus relates to the seventeenth-century household. Their alteration was part of the later eighteenth-century building work at Quenby by Shuckburgh Ashby, who created a two storey open hall and raised the floor level of the north (service) cross-wing.⁶⁰ The architectural anomalies that survived the eighteenth-century alterations indicate a more complex seventeenth-century house than is immediately apparent. It now appears that the long and costly building of Quenby Hall between 1618 and 1636 involved revisions in planning.

Conclusions

The relationship between Quenby's architectural style, and the social position of its occupants has until now been evaded. The Ashbys are well documented as county gentry with no association to the court; a status which contrasts with the 'prodigy' house built by George Ashby. George Ashby's marriage (c.1625) to the daughter of a London merchant who was seeking to establish himself among the Leicestershire gentry, does provide an explanation for the unexpected grandeur of Quenby in terms of finance and social aspiration. Elizabeth also probably contributed to the length of time it took to complete the house. The fact that Lowesby was sold at the date Quenby was finished implies the Ashbys ran short of money after spending on the house. The decline of the main Ashby family by the early eighteenth century, and the sale to Shuckburgh Ashby, demonstrate that the family were unable to sustain a grand household on the means of a county gentry family.⁶¹

The published accounts of Quenby include several unreliable sources. For instance, the tradition that Evelyn visited Quenby is unfounded; the chronology is wrong for Evelyn to have met 'Planter' Ashby and there are no references to Quenby in Evelyn's published correspondence or diaries. More likely, 'Planter' Ashby merely read Evelyn's work on gardens.⁶² This paper has clarified the social history of Quenby and resolved the confusion over Quenby's construction. The architectural evidence, disproves any suggestion that the current hall was constructed on the base of an earlier building.

⁶⁰ Durant n.d., as n.18, north stair reset at steeper pitch, kitchen split-level but higher floor level in north west wing.

⁶¹ LRO PR/1/119/62, probate inventory of George Ashby, junior, of Quenby d.1722 worth £179 7s.10d. predeceased his father, leaving only clothes, horses, guns, £28 in plate, £5 worth of Books & £20 debts.

⁶² Latham 1907, as n.6, p.250; A. Price, *Quenby Park Restoration Plan*, n.d., in Squire de Lisle MS.

There is no reused material visible in the building, and Quenby Hall in its original construction between 1618 and 1636 is a single if attenuated build. Any earlier building on the site probably lies in the area of the outbuildings and stable block; outside the scope of this paper.

The wide range of types of ironstone used in the construction, all of which could come from one quarry, suggests careful selection of different properties for different purposes; for example, harder stone for the basement plinth and in the basement windows. The softer ironstone used extensively in the basement, which is covered in regular tool marks (visible only in the southern basement), is of very high quality and suggests that considerable care (and cost) was taken over the basement construction. If there was a break in the building programme, then it may have taken place at the end of the basement construction phase; certainly there are slight irregularities at the juncture of the brick and the ironstone basement on the eastern side of the house. The blocking of the apertures in the southern basement, and insertion of the wall dividing the southern basement from the service end of the house, appear to relate to a change of plan during construction. This may perhaps relate to a change from ironstone to brick in the construction of the house above the basement storey.

The reasons for the prolonged construction of Quenby may be explained by insufficient funds for completing the works. George Ashby's marriage to Elizabeth Bennett, in *c.*1625 after the house was begun, probably involved a financial injection necessary to complete the project, and perhaps correlated with any change in construction. While the building work stretched over sixteen years, the Ashbys were probably living either at an existing manor house at Quenby or at the house at Lowesby.

The extensive interior renovations conducted by Shuckburgh Ashby, no more than 130 years after its construction, may imply problems in the original construction.⁶³ Brick vaulting was inserted through the entire basement; presumably replacing timber floors. The new eighteenth-century floors are only partly explained by Shuckburgh's extravagant great hall. The abandonment of the southern basement may well relate to the ground water conditions in the basement which is still prone to flooding today (presumably due to a perched water table). Prolonged dampness would have rotted even large joists.⁶⁴ In addition to the reported decline in the fortunes of the Ashby family, there may have been structural reasons for the neglect of the house, which could only be remedied by the substitution of brick for timber.

The absence of more documentary evidence relating to the hall and its construction is obviously hindering further interpretation, but we hope that this summary of the evidence and clarification of the main issues will lay to rest some of the unsubstantiated interpretations from the past and provide new directions for research.

⁶³ LRO 15 D 33/11, Shuckburgh Ashby, of Quenby, 1792 will.

⁶⁴ Per. comm. J. Hather.

Acknowledgements:

We should like to thank The Squire de Lisle for access to Quenby Hall and his archive of published and unpublished papers on the history of Quenby; his kindness and forbearance during our visits was greatly appreciated. Mr Nick Hills kindly offered us his opinions on the architectural evidence. Professor John Hudson, of the Department of Geology, University of Leicester was most helpful in identifying the geology of the building stone, and also offering thoughtful comments on the origins and nature of the building materials. Finally, we should like to thank Jane Russell for her patience in putting up with our changes to the drawings, and their completion, and Stuart Laidlaw for improving the photographs.

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